

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 174

PS 010 951

AUTHOR Seifert, Kelvin
TITLE Teaching Young Children.
PUB DATE [Jun 79]
NOTE 44p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; College School Cooperation;
Early Childhood Education; *Experiential Learning;
Foreign Countries; *Kindergarten Children;
*Professional Development; Student Behavior; *Teacher
Educators; Teacher Improvement; *Teaching Experience;
Work Experience

IDENTIFIERS *Canada

ABSTRACT

In 1978, a kindergarten teacher and a university teacher at the Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, traded jobs. The story of the university teacher's experience in the kindergarten classroom is told in this compilation of monthly newsletter materials. The story begins with thoughts about preparing to teach and ends with a review of lessons learned from the experience. The topics discussed include establishing routines, meeting parents, field trips, children's friendships, winter clothing, noise and Eclipse Day, to second language learning children and needing love. Significant behavior of individual children is identified and reflected upon in several of the sections. Topics are never considered in the abstract, but grow out of the teacher's experience of the needs and behavior of the young children in the classroom environment. For example, the section on children's friendships addresses the problem of coping with children's rejections of classmates. Lessons learned from the experience are (1) children need physical activity, but school is often poorly equipped to allow for it, (2) some children are desperately worried about acceptance from their peers, (3) some children must test their dominance vis-a-vis other children, (4) assessing and assisting children's language is important, but extremely difficult in a classroom. (Author/RH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED178174

TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN

by

Kelvin Seifert

University of Manitoba

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kelvin Seifert

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 010951

July, 1978

Trading Jobs

I have traded jobs for next year with an experienced kindergarten teacher, Ron Enns. I will take over a classroom that he would have had in an elementary school, and Ron will take over my responsibilities at the University of Manitoba. Making the trade was neither hard nor easy -- just middling. Everyone, it seemed, needed to be consulted -- the dean, my colleagues, school teachers, and school administrators. And consulted more than once. But on the whole everyone, from top to bottom, supported the idea: concerns had more to do with practical details than with the principle of the thing. We are both fortunate to have had this support.

Next year Ron and I will find out whether it was deserved. In the short run, I expect that each of us may do less well at his new job than the person we are trading with. How can a classroom teacher "know the ropes" of the university overnight? And how can a professor, an expert in theories, work as skillfully with real children as someone who has been practising for years? No way, at least at first.

But I believe that we will each do competent jobs with our new hats on, if not brilliant ones. And I believe that we will each learn things about our profession, early childhood education, that we could not learn from just another year of university, in my case, or of classroom teaching, in Ron's. It's these longrun benefits that will really matter to me, and that will make it all worthwhile. During next year, I for one will be able to share ideas with teachers and parents whom I would not otherwise be able to meet, and to learn from children in a more thorough, intimate way than as a supervisor of student teachers and a teacher of teachers. I have had these direct contacts before, for three years of preschool teaching before coming to this university. But it's time to do it again, to test my ideas about teaching against the confusions of actual children's behavior.

July, 1978

Here begins a place for me to write about children and my relationships with them. A monthly newsletter, God willing. Perhaps a word of explanation is needed.

Becoming Practical

This year I will teach children, kindergarten children, at a school in Winnipeg. To me that sounds both miraculous and fearful. I have served full-time now for four years at the Faculty of Education of the University of Manitoba. I specialized in early childhood education and developmental psychology: training teachers of very young children, and working with teachers in general about various aspects of child growth. The work has been stimulating, though sometimes also just a bit lacking.

For me, it has lacked "concreteness," tangible realness. Inelegant terms, perhaps, but the best I can find. Teaching university courses sometimes feels a bit shadowy -- like putting tokens around a chessboard, looking for ever-new combinations. I'm not always sure what the combinations "mean," but I know how to use them correctly. I'm not saying, please note, that the verbal tokens have no meaning; only that I'm not always sure what it is. Even when I sound like I do.

For the last while my heart has been telling me that working with little kids -- the ones I have been talking about all this time -- may add meaning to my work, and therefore to my life. The "bloomin', buzzin' confusion" of child behavior intrigues me, but not just from the distance of words. Real, live children attract me not so much as a replacement for the verbal chessboard of the university, but as a supplement to it. I don't really see how I can stop talking as much or as skillfully as I sometimes do, but I do hope that children can help me learn more meaningful things to say.

This newsletter is going to be one place for me to say these things. I will talk about the children whom I teach, and about children whom my teaching reminds me of, and about the feelings that I and we all have about them. Hope-

July, 1978

Becoming Practical cont.

fully I will have something to say. I am confident enough and "driven" enough to promise you material in advance. Every month or so you can expect something from me about children -- unless of course I become so confident and so driven that I write to you more often.

September, 1978

Preparing to Teach -- Early August

I have been impressed with how hard it is to prepare in a logical way to teach. I browse in this book and that; get an unexpected idea here; hear a suggestion there. But thinking systematically does not seem to happen. Instead my mind ranges around the classroom, thinking of the furniture and materials that might go in each place. And I think of the many possible "events" that can surround these objects: and the children, whom I have not even met yet.

It's all a guessing game: What might a child do here? How might they use those toys there? The possibilities seem endless, so there's no use planning too carefully for any one of them. And there's no use planning my behavior too far in advance, since so much of what I do will really be responses to the children. It is harder to plan responses than to plan initiatives.

But even my initiatives seem too numerous to keep track of. I think, for instance, I should set out some books for the children to read. But which ones? Even our modest school library has many more than I can use. And having chosen a few to start off with, what shall I do with them beyond just reading them to the class. Re-enact the story? Make puppets of the characters? Drawings? Compare one story with another? The answer seems to be, "All of the above," plus more. But when and how to do them, I presume, will depend on those now-unknown children I will be meeting in a few weeks. It won't pay to plan too carefully, too precisely until then. Note that I am not saying it won't pay to plan at all. Only that it doesn't pay to plan too carefully, if I expect to tolerate and encourage variety in children's responses.

Hence my fragmented approach to getting ready. I am capable of behaving logically, systematically when the situation calls for it. But in my opinion, preparing to teach young children does not call for it. At least, not at my stage of preparation, near the starting gate. Now my commitment is to "whole children", to use a hackneyed term, rather than to "language arts" or "music" or any other specific segment of classroom life.

September, 1978

Getting The Routines Down -- Late August

Secretly, this is one of my major goals for the first days with my children. I want both them and me to know what to expect in class from one day to the next, and indeed from one hour to the next. When do we play, and where? When do we tidy up? When to the library, and how do we go there? I suspect that my mind will not be very free to work with individuals until, and unless, I get these questions taken care of, and until I know that the children have, too.

But it's a "secret" desire; I wince a little in admitting to it. Secret, because it seems to contradict my wish for flexibility in my classroom (see above, under "Preparing To Teach"). How can a child feel free if he's busy wondering whether it's time to drop what he's doing to tidy up? How can I respond freely, for that matter, if I'm asking myself the same thing?

These questions force me to pleasant-sound, moderate sentiments: "routines with flexibility," and "freedom within structure," and the like. And they force me to me-too-ism; other teachers use structures and routines, so they must be all right.

Actually, most occupations impose limits and encourage individual initiatives at the same time. Even my own supposedly "free profession of university teaching includes tasks that I must do -- like meeting classes on time -- and others that might as well be fully "required" -- like committee work and community service and writing. In themselves, such rules and expectations do not make university teaching a "bad" job, but they do make it important for someone entering that trade to learn them quickly, in order to be able to behave freely within them.

In the same way, I will need to learn the limits of the elementary school where I work, and my children will need to learn the limits set by their teacher -- namely, me. If all these limits can be learned and followed easily, they should help us all to feel more sure of our freedoms. If not, of course, they will be a big pain in the neck. That is where I always wince, where I worry. I hope that any limits and rules that I impose on my class will enhance their freedoms, not confound them.

September, 1978

Meeting The Parents--Early September

These first days have flooded me with too many events to write about, but I want to share two parent conferences with you:

1. A Chinese grandfather, looking 80, arrives with two grand-daughters. The younger girl, it seems, is going to start school in my classroom: but neither she nor grandfather speak any English. The older girl, who looks about 7, has come along to translate for the rest of us monolinguals. Everyone is full of smiles and shyness, efforts to be nice; but I really wonder how much we are communicating.

Carefully I tell the seven-year-old that I am glad to see them; that they should not come again tomorrow because I will be seeing more parents; that the school day on Friday will be shortened; that here is a letter explaining everything for her mother or father; that she must be sure to give it to them. Grandfather, with smiles, takes the letter from our child-translator, and looks at it blankly.

Ever so quietly, the girl says, yes, she will tell her parents all of this. But she has been staring respectfully at the floor while I talked, so how much has she understood? We all smile all over again; then bow slightly and wave; then smile yet again, and part. The net result: I appreciated their courtesy, and sorely wished I could speak Chinese. Wished it, but only for a moment, because another parent walked in, ready for the next conference.

2. Big brother and little sister, of indeterminate language background, arrive unannounced and unplanned, interrupting another conference. Little sister must stay the afternoon, it seems, because "No one is at home," and because big brother "can't remember" his own telephone number, and because I have no file on the girl anyway. Big brother says that sister's name is Laurie--just Laurie. And then, like Houdini, he has vanished, leaving Laurie with me.

The girl is no trouble, and I am able to continue with my parent conferences. Gradually and silently she explores the entire classroom during her two hours with me, and uses the bathroom twice. Really I don't mind her presence--I rather like it, in fact. But I do feel exasperated: not at her or at her brother but at whoever "invented" language barriers. Who is she, anyway? Laurie is

September, 1978

Meeting The Parents--Early September cont.

not a good conversationalist, at least in English and under these conditions.

I know she will probably learn a lot of English before long, and that doing so is probably a priority for her parents. But I am still intrigued, frustrated, puzzled. Right now, Laurie is thinking and acting behind closed doors. Will she eventually come into my room more than I will go into hers?

October, 1978

It Was Hard

For those of you who have not heard it from me personally, let me say yes, beginning this year of teaching has been tiring and anxiety-ridden. I draw some comfort, though, from knowing that school has worried many of my children at least as much as it has worried me. Not that I like my children to suffer; just that it's good to know that I, too, am as human as they are. Some cried and protested coming to school the first day; and many showed a caution that kept their fears in bounds. I did not show these feelings publicly, as they did, but I felt them nonetheless. Would they "like me", accept me? Could I provide suitable materials and activities for them?

Luckily for all of us, I and most of my children got over these initial worries before long. Now we still tire each other out every day, but more from activity than fear. One day, for example, a child knocked over a set of shelves by accident, dumping and mixing all of the puzzles on the floor. And nearly every day, I still wonder whether I'm really giving my children enough materials to choose from, and organizing them for maximum usability. We keep seeming to run out of paper, and staples, and paint, and But these are problems I can work on, not ones that demand immediate escape.

October, 1978

Two Boys

Look at two children in one of my classes, members of the same human race.

Sam. Here is a boy with a round face and a big smile, and with lots to say. He comes early every day--around 8:30. At this hour he always seems to be far down the hall, or outside, apparently "going somewhere" or "doing something". He's got friends in other classes to help him pass the time.

His having the friends is not surprising. In class Sam is continually setting up dramatic play situations and recruiting others to participate. "Space Ship" was prominent this week, using colored "leggo" blocks for an instrument panel, chairs and blocks for the ship, and fire hats for helmets. This "set" had a "script" requiring two or three other actors: they blasted off, cruised around the room outside the spaceship, and occasionally even sat in the ship. I have been too busy to follow it all exactly, but "Space Ship" has recycled over and over, persisting for up to an hour at a time. Hardly the "short attention span" that young children are supposed to have!

The depth of this game, I believe, has been thanks more to Sam than to his friends. To a boy who wandered away from "Space Ship", Sam says, "Come on, Billy, we're leaving now! (i.e. blasting off)". And to some other block-builders who happened to get too close: "Hey! Can't you see we're flying?!"

Yet he is not always self-starting. "Teacher", he says one day, "I want you to help me build something" -- though this time, he is not sure just what. Or: "Teacher can't you come now and see?"-- that is, see their ^ASpace Ship, or whatever. These requests may mean I haven't been helping and participating with him enough; but since I've seen Sam make them with the children as well, I'm inclined to think he simply has a knack for getting help when, and from whom, he wants it.

Jimmy. Here is someone who enters the room fast and unannounced every morning. If I don't consciously look for him, he may slip by me completely. "Hi, Jimmy", I call to him, but he's halfway to the coatroom already. I get

October, 1978

Two Boys cont.

back only a slight, but definite smile -- no slackening of pace, no eye contact.

With equal dispatch he is back out and playing with something, but by himself. Pegboards, plasticene, puzzles seem to be his domain so far -- spatial toys, and ones that can be done alone. I speak to him occasionally, but have had only poor luck at conversation. "How's it going"? I try for openers, looking at his plasticene construction. But either I have not said the right thing, or I have not said it at the right time, or in the right way, or in the right language. I get back only a smile and perhaps a brief direct glance. He knows I'm there, but he's not talking about it. Other gambits end the same way. "Have you seen the new blocks"? or "Can you tell me about what you're doing"? or "Was it cold this morning"? A look, but no words -- at least so far.

All of which, I started to think, could be chalked up to "Bilingual Child With Very Little English". Jimmy, as it happens, has a Portugese surname, and I remembered his mother's thick accent during her initial conference. Yet I was not really happy with my quick bit of labeling, because it did not fit all my experiences with Jimmy. The boy was just too definite, too decided, about not talking with me when I tried to initiate conversation. Besides, there was one day when we were sitting together singing. During a pause, he pointed to another child in the group, and said, "He's eating some candy over there". A very respectable English construction, for a "Bilingual-Child-With-Very-Little-English".

How am I to understand and respond to the differences between Sam and Jimmy? Sam seems socially competent, socially motivated, and easy to notice; Jimmy prefers privacy, and almost ignores company -- though not quite. Sam may know English better than Jimmy, but I'm not really sure. In ten bustling school days, in fact, I have not been able to observe much more than I have shared with you here. I do not yet know what these two boys need from me or from school. So the "latest news" on Sam and Jimmy are simply these personality sketches, with supporting anecdotes. These early, tentative descriptions will need time and attention to become profound ones, with really helpful interpretations.

November, 1978

Cold Day at the Zoo

We had planned everything -- almost: notes home, the bus, granola bars for snack, volunteer parents, and sixth-grade helpers. But we could not control the weather, which turned cold the night before, and blustery.

The children hardly minded this hardship. My morning class walked slowly, but happily among the outdoor cages. A fine mist settled on us from time to time, but the children just talked about animals: "What's that, teacher"? and "We have a hamster at home (pointing to a beaver)".

We headed for the Tropical House, partly to rescue us grownups from the wind and rain. Again, even in this indoor place, the children looked and looked and talked and talked. "Come here, Susan", said one; or "Look, Mr. Seifert". Simple expressions of feelings, and basic questions and comments about the identity of animals. Not even one comment about the cold outside, or the warmth inside. Judging by their language, their minds were only on animals.

So: are kindergarten children not affected by cold weather? I pondered this possibility that day, especially when I had to visit the zoo again with my afternoon class. This second group also ignored the weather, though conditions were hardly more pleasant than in the morning. And their questions and comments were again short and pointed: "Look", "Come here", etc. Unlike the first group, however, many afternoon children lost interest in the animals part way through their visit. "Look" often meant "Look in this trash can here"; "Come here" often meant "Come run along these benches with me": and so on. Yes, some did look at and react to the animals, but just a bare majority.

This was all very interesting, but it still did not prove much about the physical resilience of young children. Maybe they really were "tougher" than grownups, but I could think of other possibilities as well. Maybe, for instance it was not so much their hardiness, as lack of experience with the zoo, and with life generally. What I saw was children talking about bits and pieces, and failing to coordinate them. Whether it was a leopard or a cobbled sidewalk,

November, 1978

Cold Day at the Zoo cont.

it is likely to be new, and to need a name and attention. If a child's attention lighted upon an "official zoo animal", then we adults felt that the trip was "going well". But a certain child may have been equally challenged by park benches and trash cans; in this case he was apt to be called "distractable", or even "misbehaving".

In any case, a lot of child-energy went to experiencing the new and strange, and thereby making it new and familiar. Rather little energy was left for complicated sentences relating these experiences to each other, and to the past and future. They used mainly just simple labelings and expressions of feelings.

We grownups, of course, had "seen it all" already: tigers, flamingos, park benches, the works. In this sense we were more easily bored by the zoo, and our attention shifted to nuisances like the weather. If the children had not given us lots to be interested in, I doubt that we would have gone that day.

November, 1978

Knowing Individuals

So far, I have not noticed the children as individuals as much as I would like. Often my memory deals with my classes as units, as whole organisms. It is not Sara or Nancy whom I think about at night, but whether, for example, "we" all stayed together when we walked down the hall, or how well "we" responded to a certain art activity. I have not mustered the energy yet (or is it the courage?) to observe Nancy cut and paste at any great length. Instead, I remember whether three kids were doing it today, or seven. And I recall how long "they" were at it -- as if "they" had begun and finished as a group, rather than as the individuals they were.

Deep down, I know that I have individuals on my hands, and not much of a team -- at least not yet. Walking from the block area, to a crafts table, to the sand box is like walking among separate worlds, each unknown to the others. A child who is busy in one of them, but who enters another for a moment, is likely to be ignored or else greeted with hostility. "Hey, get out of here! (i.e. your truck is in the way)" or "Teacher, Spencer is ruining my picture (by dumping glitter on it in passing)". A child must immediately adopt the rules of the new world he has entered, or get out. Sometimes we adults act this way too, but not so bluntly.

I will assume, for now, that knowing my children as individuals is an Unquestionable Good Thing. The problem seems to consist of entering the children's various worlds fully and individually, yet not so fully as to "lose control of the class", as we say in the trade. I cannot become just another child, enthralled in dramatic play or in cutting and pasting. But neither should I remain only the overseer, coordinating activities without observing their content.

In beginning my program this year, I have acted the overseer a lot, and left less time than I would like for child-like, individualized closeness. Rather than observe Sara or Nancy carefully, for example, I busied myself with thinking up play activities, and preparing for them. One day, for example, I

November, 1978

Knowing Individuals cont.

decided to use water color paints. So I, the overseer, went into action: I moved the painting people away from the puzzle-making people before they bothered each other; I filled the water bottles before they ran out; I declared a few rules in advance ("No paint in the sand table"). All this, and more, was done without my knowing the children very well yet, and in the name of "getting things going" for Room 22. Little or none of it was done as a clear response to the children.

These behaviors, and a lot more like them, have kept my room afloat for these seven weeks. But they have also left me wondering, more and more, what exactly my individual children have been doing all this time. Spencer and Andrew and Betty and the others. Each one. The classroom has been doing all right, but have the individual children?

December, 1978

"You're Not My Friend"

I have heard this statement a lot this year, and seen its magical powers. One time, for example, three children were playing at the sandbox, making roads and mountains. A fourth child approached and watched for a moment. Before he could act or speak, one of the originals announced to him, "You can't play here -- too many people already". "Yes, I can! Teacher said so". "Nooo (ominous inflection)". "Sherry, you're not my friend (with pouting look)". "Don't care(looking defiant but hurt)". And so on.

In this case the newcomer never did get established at the sandbox, but looked instead at me. "Teacher, Sherry said she's not my friend" -- transforming the actual comment, but capturing its spirit of rejection. I mumbled something about the sandbox belonging to everyone. But I was not at all sure that I had responded well, and I mentally noted the incident for further consideration. In various forms, rejections like this one have occurred repeatedly in my class, sometimes including tears and fights.

In fairness to my children, please note also that lots of helpful acceptance has occurred as well. "Hey, Danny, let's build a bat-cave"! and "Jean! Jean! come see what I've got"! Jean, it turned out, never did come, or even hear the invitation; but it was in fact made. The caring was there. One way or another, the children have often said or shown, "You are my friend".

I have no complaint, of course, with these positive expressions. Encouraging them is part of my job as an early childhood teacher. I provide ample free play in my program in order to allow children to seek each other out freely, to say and show a liking for each other, even here in this new setting called school. At age five, it is new to hear that yes, I am accepted by someone other than my immediate family; and just as new to say it to others. This acceptance cannot be conveyed fully by me, their teacher. I am too much like a parent for them; literally "Daddy", they sometimes call me. A goodly part of their new non-family support must be given by peers and to peers. And it must be given freely.

"You're Not My Friend" cont.

So far, so good. The problem comes when some children use their classroom freedom to reject another child, rather than to accept him. If a child is free to invite another child to play with the sand, then he is also free to ignore him, or discourage him, or downright send him away. Herein lies the trouble: Coping with the harsh behaviors, the rejections. I do not know how to allow children to group themselves freely and sincerely, yet still tolerate whatever "nasty" or unkind behaviors may result. Apparently I cannot have it both ways.

Individual invitations and rejections may not matter much, but patterns of them may. Are some children ignored in social play repeatedly? What would such a pattern do to their self-confidence, or to their social skills? As the teacher, I have noticed a few obvious patterns: one boy, for example, who is often rejected because he hits children and has little language skill. But I wonder whether other, more subtle patterns may also be unfolding which I am not sensitive enough to see.

I doubt, actually, that my classroom is a "free marketplace" of social interchanges; more likely that some children are "cornering the market", garnering more than their share of contacts with other children, and leaving some classmates in relative isolation. In a sense, some children may have more friends in my class than they deserve, and others may have fewer. But I can only suspect this, not prove it.

In any case, I am sure that the problem of acceptance and rejection is intensely important to my children. "Farmer in the Dell", for example, shows no signs of losing popularity. Here the chance to choose and be chosen is crucial, not the singing itself. I urge the children now and then to please "sing with me", but without success. They are too busy gesticulating and whispering to the chosen few in the centre of our circle. Their message is always the same: "Choose me next; single out me for special recognition". The choosers in the centre are curiously unbothered by all the pestering.

December, 1978

"You're Not My Friend" cont.

They are bathing, I presume, in their special status: the chosen ones.

Yet even this rather structured game contains dangers of rejection for the children. What if a child rarely does get chosen, time after time? What if, as some claim, Sam is "always" chosen? We have had squabbles and minor rebellions over this problem. Sometimes I have decreed that "no one may be chosen twice in one day", or even more strongly, that "we must play until everyone is chosen once". I have been basically happy with such intervention when I have done it, but I have to admit that it decreases the children's freedom to choose, and that it may also diminish their fun at the game. Under my rule, if a child has the bad luck of being chosen late in the game, he can no longer be sure that the chooser really wants to pick him personally. Now, perhaps, he has only been chosen because the teacher has insisted that "everyone must have a turn". This is not the acceptance from his peers that he craves; it is only "fairness", foisted on him by the authorities.

December, 1978

Diana

Today Diana drew a flower again. It was full of the sun and sky, in bright pastel-chalk colours. And with lots and lots of petals; a kind of daisy-chrysanthemum. She worked for a good hour to make it, then patiently lettered her name: DIANA.

The girl draws many pictures, each full of intricate details and bright varieties of colour. Drawing seems to be her medium, and for her, small is definitely beautiful. Lots of five-year-olds, of course, make lots of drawings, but Diana's stand apart by their complexity, and by Diana's way of working on them.

She sits silently, head bent intently over the paper, oblivious to her surroundings. Today, for example, she sat between Jean and May -- though she never knew it. Jean and May chattered steadily over her head: "Where's the red"? "My mum took me to the doctor's yesterday". "Look what I made"! And so on and on. For them, drawing was a social event.

Meanwhile Diana drew her flower. She could have been alone, just then, on a deserted island. Last week, in fact, she did use a table far away from the others. She made a house that time, I believe, in five colours. But working alone didn't matter to her: people or no people, the drawing was her concern, not the company. And her product showed it.

Carol and Jack: Learning the System

1. Carol sat in the circle, watching other children chasing in "Duck, Duck, Goose". Her turn had already passed. Apparently she was bored now, because she flopped on her back, smiling broadly, rolling around luxuriously on the floor in the path of the running children. Several classmates noticed her, smiled and giggled, began to flop down as well. One chaser tripped over a child.

"Sit up, Carol", said I, the ever-vigilant teacher. "You're in the way". But no result. I repeated twice more, firmly; then moved to pick her up.

Instantly Carol ran to the far side of the gym, still smiling broadly. Then her best friend ran off with her. Now a whole new game was launched, or really two games: "Run-From-Teacher" and "Enjoy-Being-Watched-By-Everybody". I was not sure which was the more rewarding to Carol.

2. Today, again, Jack read a lot during class transitions: while others arrived, and before snack, and before singing. In free play he was hard to notice for his quietness. His place was with the hardest puzzles, with ever-new designs from parquetry, with tracing wooden numbers, and with books.

"Teacher", he said, "I saw Superman at the movies last night". Today, like other days, he talked with me more than to all the other children put together. A model student, I suppose; at my first request to tidy up, he started helping. But even here he was mostly alone.

3. These children differ in a lot of ways, but one dimension impresses me in particular. Carol watches other little children -- her peers -- but Jack watches me, the authority. "Watches" here means generally "notices" as well as specifically "looks at". Carol relies on people her own age for support: her play is seldom alone, and it often involves one special friend, Brenda. As a mere grownup, I have a tough time managing her: my requests for specific actions ("Please put your boots in the hallway") seem to impose on Carol.

Carol and Jack: Learning the System cont.

For Jack, no request from me is ever unfair, no teacher-suggested activity is ever too dull. He will do nearly anything, if I have asked for it. But I believe that he compromises his involvement with classmates in the interests of "behaving himself" by school standards. I have little problem managing Jack, though he often fades into the woodwork. He is learning the system well -- or more precisely, he is learning the authority system of school. His classmate, Carol, is learning a different system, one of "friendships," and is neglecting the authorities. One is being adult-civilized; the other, peer-civilized.

Who will come out ahead? An interesting question, but instinct tells me not to answer it. All I know is who is the easier school-child now, and who is the harder.

4. A discussion of Curious George one day last week.

Mr. Seifert: Why was George always getting in trouble?

Carol: (raising hand and smiling) Because he went home and had too much poo-poo! (All giggle and smile.)

Jack: (raising hand and smiling) Teacher, I read this book before.
(Others ignore comment.)

Winter Clothes

Boots too small; zippers stuck; seams pulling apart; laces in knots; mittens lost. Scarves that must be tied "just right". And the language: "Do me now, Mr. Seifert"! "Jean, you need to get started because school is over". "Teacher, I can't do it". "Yes, you can; start with one boot, and I'll come in a minute".

And the silent language; a bundled child with scarf in hand, smiling hopefully. Waiting. Waiting how long? I have been too busy with another child to notice her until just now. Or a boy running around the carpet, "wearing" a skidoo suit only around his ankles: more darn fun, to play among piles of clothing!

"Let me help you", I say to him; whereupon he sprawls onto the floor in a "cooperative", ever-so-limp heap. He gazes dreamily out the window while I struggle with zippers, boots, whatever. "Watch me", I say. "First I put this right boot on. Now you push your foot, hard"! He arouses briefly, but not as long as I'd wish. He is the last to leave.

And so it goes. I must admit to learning about my children from this daily ritual. Sally can dress fast, in spite of laces and extra sweaters to button. George has somewhere learned to wait for full, personalized care by grownups -- he refuses to dress until he gets it. Tanya cannot describe what she is doing, but she will wait patiently -- usually -- for the minor help she needs. Sean cannot tell me much either, but he does know pronouns and proverbs: "Do this now"! he shouts in my ear. If I do not understand him immediately, I must coax him back to work and to good humour.

I suppose my children are gradually learning to dress themselves more independently. Perhaps they are -- but I'm not really convinced of it. So far, the trends toward improvement have been far from obvious. I am taking their learning on faith. Some day, just as sure as I'm sitting here, I believe that my children will be fully competent adults, and that many will themselves be helping five-year-olds with winter clothes.

Winter Clothes cont.

Yes, I do learn about my children from this Terrible Transition Time, the beginning and end of each day in winter. And I am sustained by faith, if not evidence, that I am indeed helping them to learn an important life skill. Arrivals and dismissals even give me lots of time to talk with my children, to encourage complex language on their part.

Yet I would never choose to dress and undress thirty or forty children twice a day, Monday through Friday. The same "educational" benefits could just as well be achieved, for example, by dropping every child in an icy bath twice a day! Think about it. During their cold bath, I could learn much about my children as individuals. Some would get angry, and some cry; some would talk a lot, and some be still; some learn techniques of coping, and others turn into "slow learners" about baths. I could even use the "opportunity" of a cold bath to encourage language development in the children: "How does it feel? Tell me about it. What will you do after your cold bath"? Etc.

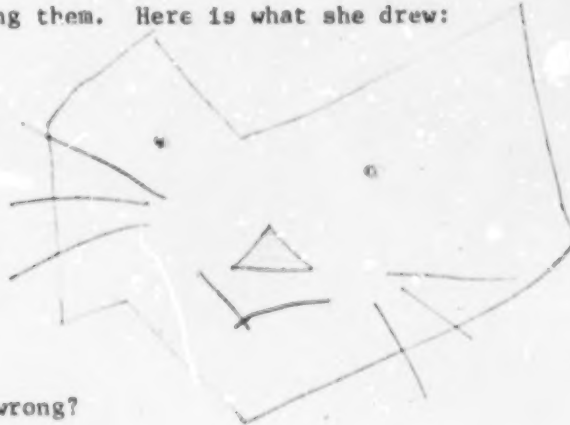
I thank God that cold baths are not required in public kindergartens. But winter is required every year, it seems, and most especially in the Canadian prairies. Twice a day winter clothes come to kindergarten, "building character" in my children like a cold bath.

January-February, 1979

What-Will-They-Do-Next? Department

Dear Mr. Seifert,

I gave Sherry a page full of dots and suggested that she "make some triargles" among them. Here is what she drew:



What did I do wrong?

Yours perplexed,

Mr. K. Seifert,
Kindergarten Teacher, Greenway School

Dear Mr. Seifert,

I think everything is all right with Sherry. You might review your goals for her, or your ways of talking with her. Also, your dots may have resembled small bugs or rodents attractive to cats.

Keep trying and good luck,

Dr. K. Seifert,
Universtiy of Manitoba

Noise

At first they were running in circles, "aimlessly": Sam, Mark, Kris, and Sean. Bother! I thought; noisy play is always so hard for me to take, whatever its supposed merits. The activity lay in that grey area between things that I immediately stop, and things that I gladly permit. I know children need to be active, but so often it tires me out and seems to disrupt the class. For a moment, I feared the worst.

But events did not develop as I feared. "Let's make a circle", said Sean, "to run around". In a trice, the four had assembled six chairs in a tight circle at the centre of the rug. Then more running, and a bit more covert wincing on my part. Various car noises emanated from their general vicinity -- all part of the game, a noisy game.

Being both a bit worried and a bit interested, I suggested, "How about inside? Inside the chairs (gesturing a big circle interior to their set-up)". My suggestion was used, but only part way. "OK! In and out! Hey, in and out! -- again from Sean, apparently today's leader. The four began weaving among the chairs, like a high-speed version of "In-and-out the windows". Sean's idea proved better than mine. No chairs fell over, and they found the pattern more challenging than the simple circle.

"Time out"! I called, and to my surprise they all promptly sat down in the chairs. I sat with them. "Rest period. Let's count to ten". Together we chanted the numbers. Then they were off again, as fast as ever. I just sat and watched, having exhausted my ideas on guidance and control for the time being.

But Sean had not run out of his ideas. This time it was he who called, "Time out"! Just as promptly as before, all sat down, and all counted -- this time to twelve, as it happened. Off again. Then down again at Sean's command. And one or two more repetitions -- each time counting to a different number.

March, 1979

Noise cont.

Their time-out-for-counting was working for them. Noisy they were, but also constructive. These four children had woven a complicated spatial pattern; They had controlled their own activity level even at this high pitch; they had practiced reciting a few numbers; and they had acted as a loose sort of team. My faith in them was restored.

Of course, they had also made thumpings and bumpings in the process, which I hoped had not carried too far outside my own classroom. And they had needed guidance from me -- I think. And unfortunately, the whole episode left a residue of guilt in me. Why had I not "believed" in them in the first place?

Partly, I think, because I had not understood their purposes when they began, and partly because experience has shown me that I often have little sympathy for fast, loud behavior. The commotion turns me off, tempts me to simply label active children as "wild" or "hyper". Maybe not all early childhood teachers react this way, but I do.

When, however, I do start understanding what very active children are up to, my tolerance for their noise rises, and I may change my label to "energetic" or "enthusiastic". The behaviour may be the same, but my perception of it is has transformed. The change may not occur every time, but it happens often enough that I notice it. For the children in my class, the moral seems to be: if Mr. Seifert cannot understand what you are doing, it is better to be quiet about it, than to jump around a lot.

March, 1979

Teaching in the Here and Now

Teaching school has immediacy, a sort of "here and nowness". Terry's mitts are lost and must be found now, not later, since he is about to go home. Natasha is ready to talk about her drawing now, not later; if I wait three minutes, she may be doing something else, and I will have lost my chance. Sam is mad at George now, and has just punched him hard; his anger won't wait for fifteen minutes, when I may have less to do. Much, so very much, happens "now", it seems; relatively few problems can be saved until I, the teacher, may prefer to deal with them.

At school current classroom events take on such intensity that I can be driven to anger by "little" things -- if they are happening in the present. Two children fight over who shall be first in line, for example. Five or six "little" hassles like this all at once, and I usually show anger. Later I may laugh about it, but not now, while it is going on.

By the same token, the pressures of teaching disappear rather quickly-- almost magically -- when "good moments" finally occur. I forget my recent frustration. Five minutes ago Kris "wasted" a dozen sheets of construction paper by filling them with staples. But now I like her again because she is talking well about a drawing she made. Or take Sam: This boy "lost" his runners this morning and then found them again after much fuss. But I soon forget my frustration because now he is building an extraordinary house from blocks. Now, in the all-important "now."

Even if no truly good moments occur that day, then at least I can always count on relief when my children leave at 3:30. Perhaps the children were loud today, though not really "bad" in their behaviour; perhaps they did not appreciate the crafts activity that I thought was terrific; perhaps they bickered; spilled milk during snack; took a long time getting dressed for home. Still, in spite of it all, these irritations disappear quickly when the last child leaves. I may well ponder that night what I did wrong today: could I have prevented some of the problems? But after school, I am not pressured for immediate solutions any longer -- not until tomorrow.

March, 1979

Teaching in the Here and Now cont.

As a teacher, to tell the truth, I am comforted by knowing that I cannot turn the clock back after each day; that what I did is done; and that what I did was, at the least, the best that I could do. That, I suppose, is one of the practitioner's major satisfactions. Even if my solutions to today's problems were far from perfect, at least they were there when the children needed them.

April, 1979

Readers of this newsletter who live outside Manitoba may need to be told that Winnipeg experienced a total eclipse of the sun on Monday, February 26, from 10:47 to 10:49 a.m. In spite of considerable public criticism, most city-area school divisions decided to hold school "as usual", and to forbid any arrangements for viewing the eclipse except on television. Here is what happened to my classroom at Greenway School.

Eclipse Day

By nine o'clock I breathed a sigh of relief, because it was evident that less than half of my children would be attending that day anyway. Fewer children would mean less commotion all the way around. Except for the small numbers, my morning began normally; my eight children and I went to our gym period, then returned to the usual sorts of activities -- water colours, I believe, were big that day. The dental nurses came to check the teeth of the few available children. No child in my room asked why the window shades had been pulled completely down.

At about 10:15 I turned on the small portable T.V. that I had brought from home for the occasion. Not much to see, really; two men talking, but well over the heads of five-year-olds, plus the occasional shot of some sort of crescent. I told my children, "That's the moon starting to cover the sun". A couple of children asked if they could watch a different station; I said, "No, let's watch the eclipse"; there was some grumbling; a few children wandered off, looking for other things to do.

By 10:25 or so, two teachers had independently stopped by to ask whether or not I was planning to bring my children to the school library. Apparently the other classes had already gathered there, in front of a larger television set. I decided to go, but more for my own need for adult company than for any need the children had expressed. Most likely they would have been happier staying in their own, familiar classroom, full of alternatives to the somewhat boring television show. Watching T.V. is nice, they told me with their initial

April, 1979

Eclipse Day cont.

interest; but not watching two men just talking, and a crescent sun that changed so slowly. In any case we walked to the library; sat with the other classes; and watched the crescent sun on a bigger screen.

At 10:35 or so we turned off the lights to help show the growing darkness, and we raised the blinds on the library windows, which faced safely away from the sun. We teachers took turns surreptitiously running out of the room to check the progress of the eclipse. Our sixty-odd children talked loudly throughout these last minutes, but I for one was too distracted to listen much to what they were saying. Did they "understand" what was happening, even in a child-like way? Occasionally I heard other teachers ask eclipse-related questions, or make comments about the T.V.-sun. But our efforts were sporadic at best.

How much, indeed, did the children understand what was happening? All of us had prepared the children in at least minimal ways -- mainly through earlier, brief discussions of the upcoming total solar eclipse. Some teachers had given it more than minor attention: shown pictures, had children draw pictures, turned the class into a small solar system with John circling Susan, and Mary circling John, midst explanations. The school librarian had found an early-level story book about a solar eclipse. Through it all, the appropriate cautions had been repeated about the danger of blindness from looking directly at the sun. In my class, these cautions had emanated as much from the children as from me.

But now, at 10:45 a.m., what did these children know of the eclipse? Some of mine commented to me about the darkness outside. Otherwise, my children behaved much the way they did during boring movies, only perhaps more so. Which was not surprising, considering what they got to see: two men talking and a rather unassuming crescent sun on a T.V. screen: And a fairly long sit in a rather dark library.

April, 1979

Eclipse Day cont.

In fairness to the children, however, I should emphasize that my child-observation skills reached a low ebb during the solar eclipse. At 10:47, the moment of totality, I could only think about getting myself a good look, and about helping my colleagues to have turns looking as well. For those two minutes and sixteen seconds, the children could have stood on their heads, and I would have only barely noticed. Thankfully, no child needed urgent personal attention just then.

When the sky began to lighten again at 10:50, a few children ran to the library windows, curious to get a better look at whatever-it-was making the sky so dark. This was my only real moment of worry about controlling their desires to see the sun directly. The library faced safely north, but would they also run to the windows in my classroom, which faced un-safely south? We assembled at the door and ambled down to Room 22.

I had no need to worry. By 10:55 we were at home again in our own room, and within seconds the children had found things to do, things more interesting than staring at a blinding sun. I elected to have no follow-up discussion, to help keep the lid on any further curious peeking at the sun. In so doing, I again helped to muffle the meaning of this unique event.

End of story. The morning was extended to 12:05, two minutes after the official end of Winnipeg's solar eclipse. Little explanation of the longer hours had been given to the children or to the parents; hopefully anyone who noticed the time extension was also smart enough to know that it was done to reduce post-eclipse temptations to watch the sun. The next day, however, one of my fathers picked up his child at 12:05 again by mistake because he had interpreted the time change as a permanent one. He, for one, had missed the point of the precaution until I explained it to him: but hopefully he was in a minority.

All in all, the eclipse was a difficult situation for teachers, and for me in particular. As a staff member, I needed badly to see this once-in-a-

April, 1979

Eclipse Day cont.

lifetime phenomenon, come hell or high water -- or school board decision. The senior administration confounded my need by deciding to keep children in school that morning, but forbidding direct viewing of the eclipse. The result was more "baby sitting" and less "teaching" that morning than usual, at least at the key moments of totality. The pressures of this event made a really professional response difficult to figure out, much less to carry out. At least I was far from alone among teachers in my conflict, either at Greenway or at many other schools.

Of course maybe I am being too hard on myself about behaving "unprofessionally". It could well be argued (and was) that we teachers were more effective at protecting children's eyesight than the average babysitter or parent would have been, even if we failed miserably to "teach" at the crucial moments of totality. So maybe I fulfilled an important role that day in "just babysitting", in just protecting eyes.

But now the total solar eclipse is over, and it will not come to Winnipeg again for hundreds of years. Too bad, because I believe that most of us appreciate its importance much more now than beforehand. Before February 26th descriptions of the eclipse often sounded either "merely scientific" or else "hoplessly romantic". Either way, the eclipse did not sound like it deserved a holiday of its own.

Afterwards, the scientific descriptions still sounded "merely scientific" -- fodder for science classes. But those romantic accounts, those descriptions of the eclipse's personal impact: those acquired new meaning. Suddenly they sounded rather "true" and important, in a spiritual and personal sense. When else, after all, does day turn into night, and the sun become a brilliant halo? After the eclipse, it was easier to believe that such an event deserves a four-hour holiday, just long enough to see it. Instead, though, my children got a spell of sitting in the dark, watching daytime T.V.

May, 1979

All You Need is a Smile

Tanya smiles and tilts her head, looking just a bit shy and "cute". What is she saying by this mannerism? Six months with the girl have still not shown me the answer. Does she want to talk? Want to listen? Just look? If she catches me watching her too long, she melts into her big, pretty smile-with-head-tilt; but without words.

In fact I rarely hear Tanya say much to anyone. She drifts tentatively from one activity to another, trying a few and observing all. Potato prints were out today: "I want to make one", is all she says. Then later, "Look at mine". In between these remarks, I complimented her choices of colours, asked what she would do next with the blue, and even point-blank asked her to name the colour she was using.

Tanya ignored my compliment and my earlier, more open question. Only the last, very closed question brought an actual verbal response. What colour was she using? "That one", she replied simply, pointing at her work rather than labeling it. "That's blue", I prompted. "Oh". Then Tanya gave me her big, disarming smile again, and I was back where I had started from.

Tanya talks little, and talks simply. Yesterday she stood quietly next to the tape cassette recorder, while others operated the machine and dickered over its custody. But Tanya did not enter this give and take. She simply watched and listened, and after a short time she came to me. "They won't let me have a turn", she said. By which, I believe, she meant that she had not figured out how to "slide in" to the conversation on her own. And she was right. Watching her, I saw her stand and wait, and smile faintly to the others. But if she understood the discussion going on around her, nevertheless she responded to its details very little. Tanya looked slightly dazed.

For that matter, I am not sure she synchronized with the children's faces and gestures very well, either -- though here I am less certain. When one child did smile at her, did she smile back immediately, or at some later time than one she chose? When one child did relinquish control of the recorder to her, did she graciously receive it, or still stand and wait? I will have to watch Tanya

May, 1979

All You Need is a Smile cont.

more closely to answer these questions accurately, but meanwhile I am concerned.

Tanya remains a puzzle to me. I know that she does not speak English at home, and that she shows many signs of a second-language learner at school. But saying this does not really satisfy me much. What is happening underneath that smile? What grammatical constructions, either foreign or English, are forming under the surface? What thoughts and what methods of thinking? What feelings beyond her eternal smile? I would like to know, but have not yet been able to know, even after these six months of daily contact.

May, 1979

Needing Love

"Mr. Seifert! David won't share his truck with me"! says Jerry. A complaining tone oozes out of every word. He looks at me with deep, dark eyes, pleading.

Yet he has often cheered my soul as well. Yesterday he walked into school sprightly, clapping his hands in a fancy syncopation--not merely in unison--with his footsteps. I was impressed; and smiled to show it. He replied with a knowing smile of his own, as if his complex rhythms were easy, were mere "child's play". For him, apparently, they were.

But it was not long that same day before Jerry was aching with a need for acceptance again, and unfortunately at the expense of others. "I do too get to play here"!! he bellowed. His voice is always loud even when it is "soft", and Jerry's anger today, as usual, carried unmistakably over the din of my somewhat noisy classroom. This time he was with three other children at the sandbox, determined to establish himself in one corner of it, and in the bargain to get a "controlling interest" in the rest of the sand box as well. But Jerry was rather pushy and blunt about it: too pushy for the others there. Words were exchanged, and then sand was tossed. Finally Jerry was catapulted out of the sandbox, so to speak, by a mild punch from Derek. He "landed" on the rug, crying hard.

Here again I saw Jerry's frailty, mixed so thoroughly with his bright cheerfulness and bravado. A few days earlier he had built a beautiful garage/house/building from the unit blocks. Many shapes and directions it had, and each tower received careful balancing and tender loving care. Jerry smiled big at what he made, and told me much about its parts and their various functions.

Then he left it, which proved his undoing. The building stood for nearly thirty minutes -- a surprisingly long time to be unattended, I thought. Eventually, though, the inevitable happened: another child passed by and decided

May, 1979

Needing Love cont.

to make a few changes. He knocked down the towers, relocated a wall, and began driving the cars that Jerry had carefully parked inside.

"Hey, you can't play there"! came Jerry's shout from across the room, top volume. "That's mine"! And then, "Mr. S..E..I..F..E..R..T..": Sam is using MY garage"! Fearing that I could not win in this situation, I retreated to stating the general class rule: if you leave a toy or activity for a long time then it becomes common property again. "Mine", he just said, and cried. A typical setback, really; but it felt extreme to Jerry. The building could have been set right again the next day, or even later the same day; but for Jerry just then, the loss was permanent, eternal.

Jerry needs a lot of love, it seems -- perhaps more than I can ever give as a teacher. Nearly every day, between conflicts, he will smile warmly and give me a hug. That special closeness, the touching, makes him glow and relax. By the same token, any sort of special attention means a lot to Jerry.

Like "show and tell": one day he collected all the old drawings out of the other children's lockers, and asked me if he could show them to the class during one of our meeting times. I agreed, and when his time came, he presented each drawing as his own; "I made this", "I drew this one, too". And so on -- they were all "his", even though none were in reality, and some actually had other children's names plainly written on them. I corrected his reports of authorship as matter of factly as I could, but I suspect that nonetheless some children were offended, and others were muddled, or both.

In any case Jerry was a star for a few minutes. I was not really angered by the blatant falsehoods -- like Piaget, I thought him too young to "know" what he was doing in the adult sense. I was more simply saddened by the incident -- perhaps like the psychotherapists, I felt that his behavior showed how terribly important a bit of special love and admiration was to this boy.

May, 1979

Needing Love cont.

Unfortunately school will insure that special attention is scarce for Jerry, if only because of the competing presence of other children. Like it or not, Jerry cannot always be the star, cannot always save his block constructions just for himself, and cannot always get a hug just when he himself wants one. I am tempted sometimes to consider this to be good for him. I would like to think that the mere presence of a peer group will force this boy to learn ways of sharing and cooperating. I wish for a modified "school of hard knocks", made more modern, gentle, and nice.

But I have no real evidence to support the idea. Judeo-Christian heritage notwithstanding, we may not always learn from suffering. It is true, in particular, that Jerry's demands and conflicts may "teach him a lesson" about cooperation. But they may also teach him better ways to guard and protect himself, and to make demands and wage conflicts. Unlike Piaget, I think social conflict among children can nurture selfishness as well as growth.

The effect that Jerry's conflicts will have on him will depend on more than mere exposure to groups. It will also depend partly on me -- on my skill at influencing his encounters. I am supposed to get involved at just the right times, and in just the right ways. I am supposed to help Jerry to see how to share, and to discard fighting and crying. I am supposed to give him just enough loving to build up his confidence, but not so much as to smother him. I am supposed to know what to say to him, and what not to say, during all his crises -- and during ordinary moments as well. If I do all this, then I will meet Jerry's needs.

Looking at my responsibilities so bluntly, I tremble in my shoes. I seem to owe Jerry an awful, awesome lot. Can I ever give him enough?

What did I learn by teaching young children this year? In one form or another, I have asked myself this question lately, but it has proved surprisingly difficult to answer. It is not that I have learned little, but that I have learned too much; and that I have learned it in my heart, as well as my head. Therefore I cannot easily list the effects of my experience -- especially not in a short news-letter. Therefore, too, much of what I have learned has not been "new material", strictly speaking -- after all, I did teach for three years prior to becoming a professor. Much of my learning has instead been a deepening and reviving of lessons previously learned.

But enough of disclaimers. The question of what I have learned deserves a reply. Here it is, below; please keep the comments in the paragraph above in mind as you read on.

Lesson #1: Children need physical activity, but school is often poorly equipped to allow for it. Ample evidence for this dilemma appeared after just a few weeks of school, and no day this year went by without further confirmation. In a nutshell, here was the problem:

From time to time a few children would run around the room, or climb on the cloakroom lockers, or jump off the tables. Since my classroom was small and had hardwood floors, these behaviors at the least drove me crazy. At the most, they interfered with other, more quiet children. I therefore steadfastly forbade such antics, with good -- but not perfect -- success. Every now and then, someone, somewhere started running again, or jumping, or climbing.

Regular gym periods did not prevent such behavior "relapses" completely, though it may have reduced their size and frequency. Many children were simply not able to encapsulate their gross motor activity into an appointed time period and a special place. They needed movement in the context

Lesson #1 cont.

of their other activities, not out of context. Some children, of course, were habitually quiet, and most were quiet some of the time. But the problem of gross motor activity remained. Sooner or later, most of my children needed to use their legs and arms and bodies to act out some idea or plan or feeling that concerned them, or that I had suggested to them. Where could they do it?

Lesson #2: Some children are desperately worried about acceptance from their peers. Since I have written about this problem before (see the December, 1978 newsletter, "You're not my friend!"), I do not want to backtrack on this topic unduly. The worries over acceptance, though, have been so prominent among some of my children, that I must mention it again among my major lessons of the year.

Jean, for instance, went to Baroque lengths to insure her acceptance in class. When she had her turn in group games like "Farmer in the Dell", or "Duck, Duck, Goose", she would often whisper across the circle to her friend Irene. The words varied, but went something like this: "I'll choose you, and be your friend. Then you choose Sharon, so she'll be your friend. Then we can all be my friend later." How they were to show their collective gratitude was never clear. By similar edicts, these "friendships" could also be severed; little or no relevant behaviors were needed to establish the bonds, or to break them.

I often felt sorely tempted to scold children like Jean for such fickle choosiness. I wanted everyone to be friends with everyone in my class, and I wanted no one to be spooked by fleeting pronouncements about who was socially accepted by whom. I found, however, that the children worried about acceptance were not nearly ready for discussions of my adult, administrative viewpoint. Jean was usually unconvinced if I told her that so-and-so "likes you even though she's cross right now". For Jean, acceptance did not exist unless it was immediately manifest; and since there were always moments when it was not, her concern with it persisted. "Are you my friend?" was still being asked at the end of the year.

Lesson #3: Some children must test their dominance vis-à-vis other children. In other words, they had to see if they could be in charge. The issue here was not acceptance, as discussed above, but relative influence. No one in a conflict about dominance was kicked out of the group; he was only put in his place.

Who, for example, would get to sit in the driver's seat in the pretend taxicab that has just been built? Recently an argument occurred in my room about this problem, but the losers were still welcome to play -- if they would sit in the back seats. Team spirit was needed to settle such a conflict, not individualism. A team could not afford to go around casting out its own members; yet only one could be the one in charge -- in this case, the taxi driver.

I was slow to recognize dominance concerns this year because much vying, it turned out, occurred under disguises. Bob, Jerry, and Derek, for example, had a heated argument last week over our best truck. The argument, however, was not about which child would be the one and only one to use a truck, but about who would be the first to use it. The three presented their problem to me as one of sharing, not as a contest of who gets to set the rules. Experience with these children, though, suggested that whoever was "first" with the truck was rather likely to be the "only" one with it until another contest of wills occurred. The children were acting by a "domination" rule of their own, not by the "sharing" rule that I kept asking them to use. In their case, talk about taking turns was mere window dressing, used to please the teacher.

Given the small size of my classroom, such "domination imperatives" posed real problems. My children were forced to continue working and playing in the same room in spite of any conflicts about who was boss. No child was really able to leave another child or quit a group fully or permanently. If a child was socially rejected, as in Lesson #2 above, this fact provided him with a real advantage: sooner or later, the children who had cast him out would be forced to deal with the rejected child again. Their continuing contact would at least set the stage for renewed acceptance.

Lesson #3 cont.

A dominated child, however, was prevented by the cramped quarters from fully escaping the fact of being bossed. He could never really quit the team, so to speak, even by playing somewhere else in the room.. "Elsewhere" might involve children who he knew very little, or activities in which he had little skill or interest. These other children and activities, of course, might be good for him, but they did not solve his original problem. Sooner or later, either that day or another, a child who was constantly being bossed around would cross paths with the children who were doing the bossing. He would have to sit in the back seat of the taxicab again, if it still existed, or argue another losing battle over that truck -- again. As the teacher, of course, I could set right any gross inequities. But it was beyond my powers to see them all, or to act fairly about the more subtle conflicts.

Lesson #4: Assessing and assisting children's language is important, but extremely difficult in a classroom. A short time in my room showed me that my children used language for a huge variety of purposes. Sometimes a child talked to take care of himself: "That's mine!" or "I'm going to the washroom." Other times, he talked in order to direct other children, or to get himself involved with others:

"Let's stack these blocks here." or

"Come on, Stella, look at these soap bubbles!"

Less commonly, I noticed children more-or-less reasoning with language:

"You have to water the seeds first before they will grow." or

"Barry picked Sam (in the game) because they're best friends. They always play together."

And I noticed language for pretending:

"This is our Bat Cave, and you're Robin."

All this -- the variety in language functions -- I saw after rather brief contact with my class as a whole. Much more slowly, though, I realized that I could not really be sure how much variety was actually occurring for each individual child. Some seemed to talk well -- that is, use language in various ways -- and others seemed quiet, at least whenever I was around. I

Lesson #4 Cont.

felt very unsure of these global assessments, however, since every child could be persuaded to use language for practically any purpose, if given the right encouragement.

Gary, for example, was a child who "talked well." But he would immediately confine his talk to merely personal needs if, say, he were punched in the stomach! More lofty uses of language - like logical reasoning and dramatic play - would suddenly disappear. On the other hand, even a quiet child like Jim could usually be made to discuss his current project at some length -- if, that is, I found the necessary comments and questions to get him started. If I did, then he would "reason." For both children, language use was affected heavily by the situation.

Since, however, I could not hope to observe all the situations encountered by every child in my room, reliable assessment of an individual's language use became very difficult, to say the least. I was "in on" much child language and language situations, but probably not in on most. I had to hope that I was hearing a representative sample of child talk, though I really had no evidence that I was. Various biases crept into my observations, some of which I noticed only very slowly.

Like with Gary, for instance, that "good talker." He endeared himself to me early in the year by repeatedly collaring me for conversations:

Gary: Mr. Seifert, you don't have to worry about these shoes. You know why?

Me: Why?

Garry: Because they're runners, not snow boots. You get tired when we wear snow boots, don't you?

Me: Yes.

Much as I enjoyed these conversations, though, I eventually noticed that Gary's language away from me -- either alone or with peers -- was much more limited and self-centered than his conversations directly with me. Away from me, Gary did not talk as much; and when he did, he talked in much simpler ways and for more basic purposes.

Lesson #4 cont.

Gary: (Blowing bubbles) "These sting!"

Gary: (After making a kite) "A kite!"

Other children showed this kind of difference when they talked and played without me; but in my opinion, Gary showed it more extremely.

In the end I felt very unsure of how much ability Gary actually had at using language. He could handle language structures -- grammar and vocabulary -- reasonably well, like most of my children. But how well could he put these structures to various uses? He liked to sound grownup with me, but could he talk logically with his peers if he needed to explain something to them? Could he talk simply with me sometimes, just for fun -- or did he always need to present himself as a "respectful genius" whenever I was listening?

Surely Gary's ability to vary his use of language will be an important life skill for him in the years ahead, both in school and out. This year, however, I have not been able to assess his ability accurately -- nor, for that matter, the language-use abilities of my other children. Why? Because I have not been able to be everywhere in my classroom at once; and because my mere presence in a conversation with children always affected its purposes very, very much.